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# LOCKE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

*(Part 2 of 2)*

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human  
Understanding, bk. 2 ch. 27*

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# LOCKE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

- What does Locke mean by the sortal concept '**person**'?
    - First, note that he distinguishes '*man*' (= the organism or functioning human body) from '*person*' (which he also sometimes calls '*self*'). (ECHU 2.27.6, 2.27.21, 2.27.17)
    - For Locke, 'person' specifies an **intelligent, thinking being that is conscious of itself as itself across time** (2.27.9, 2.27.17).
    - It is bound up with a first-person point of view or awareness (a '*consciousness*'). Locke says what you are right now (*qua person*) is a certain stretch of self-aware consciousness, made up of thoughts, sensations, emotions, memories, intentions etc...
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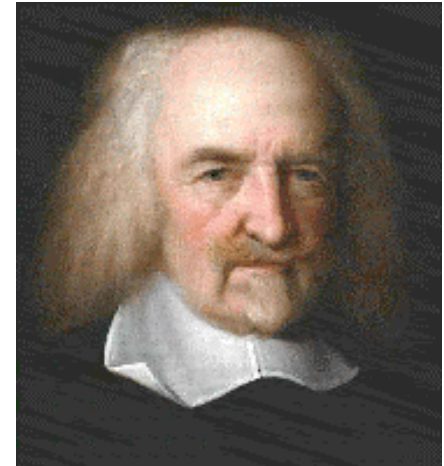
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# “PERSON IS A FORENSIC TERM”

- For Locke personal identity is tied up with **expectations** (what should you hope for, anticipate, fear) and **memories**. (2.27.9, 2.27.17)
  - It is also tied up with **moral responsibility** (what acts you should feel shame, remorse, or pride for) and **just punishments and rewards** (what acts you should be justly be rewarded or punished for). (2.27.18, 2.27.26)
  - As Locke puts it, “*person is a forensic term [i.e. having to do with courts of law] appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only intelligent agents capable of law, and happiness and misery.*” (2.27.26)
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# SOME TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

- **Materialists** (e.g. Thomas Hobbes, 17<sup>th</sup> C) say that personal identity across time consists in the continuing existence of the thing doing the thinking, which for them is a (self-aware, intelligent, conscious) *living brain*.
- **Dualists** (e.g. René Descartes, 17<sup>th</sup> C) say that personal identity across time consists in the continuing existence of the thing doing the thinking, which for them is an *immaterial soul-substance*.



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## LOCKE'S CRITERION OF PERS. ID. CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH MEMORY

- Locke says that what is required for personal identity is continuity of consciousness through memory.
  - What you are (qua person) in the course of your life is **a series of stretches of consciousness**, connected through **memory**.  
(ECHU 2.27.9-10, 2.27.16, 2.27.17, 2.27.23)
  - Locke doesn't usually put it in quite these terms (his language usually involves '*consciousness of*' earlier times, rather than '*memory of*'). But the generally accepted view is that memory is what he's driving at
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# ARGUMENTS FOR LOCKE'S VIEW

- (1) “since consciousness ... **is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things**, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of rational being: and **as far back as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then.**” (2.27.9)

“it being the same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed to one individual substance only, or can be continued in a succession of substances. ... For it is by the consciousness [an intelligent being] has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is *self* to *itself* now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness extends to actions past or to come” (2.27.10)

--What's the argument here? (It's not really clear...)

--Personal identity must consist in first person self-awareness, not third person facts about what is doing the thinking etc. (?)

--Conscious self-awareness is necessary (and sufficient) for personhood in the present moment; hence by extension it is necessary (and sufficient) for personhood across time. (?)

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## LEIBNIZ (A CONTEMPORARY 17<sup>TH</sup> C RATIONALIST PHILOSOPHER) ENDORSES A SIMILAR ARGUMENT (?):

(\*) Think about what **you have reason to desire or fear.**

“But the intelligent soul, knowing what it is—having the ability to utter the word ‘I,’ a word so full of meaning—does not merely remain and subsist metaphysically ...but also remains the same morally and constitutes the same person. For it is **memory or knowledge of this self** that renders it capable of punishment and reward. Thus the immortality required in morality and religion does not consist merely in this perpetual subsistence common to all substances, for **without the memory of what one has been, there would be nothing desirable about it. Suppose that some person all of a sudden becomes the king of China, but only on the condition that he forgets what he has been, as if he were born anew; practically, or as far as the effects could be perceived, wouldn’t that be the same as if he were annihilated and a king of China created at the same instant in his place?** That is something this individual would have no reason to desire.”

(*Discourse on Metaphysics* [1686], section 34)

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# ARGS FOR LOCKE'S VIEW

*(continued)*

- (2) Our own personal identity is transparent to ourselves. Most of the time we are unproblematically aware of our own persisting personal identity across time (and that we are responsible for such and such earlier deeds etc). But then this awareness can depend only on facts about our experience that are unproblematic from the empiricist point of view (consciousness, memory, etc). It cannot depend on supersensible facts about which we know nothing--such as facts about whether consciousness ultimately resides in a material substance, an immaterial soul-substance, a stream of collaborating soul-substances, or whatever. (ECHU 2.27.27)
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# ARGS FOR LOCKE'S VIEW

*(continued)*

(3) Consider the various puzzle cases.

--The Prince and the Cobbler. Were consciousness to jump bodies, wouldn't we want to say that the person (the one we should hold responsible for earlier deeds etc) has also jumped bodies? (ECHU 2.27.15)

--Night Man and Day Man (like Jekyll and Hyde). Don't we want to say that there are *two* persons here (two different individuals in terms of responsibility etc), *even if* they share a body and *even if* they share one immaterial soul-substance? (ECHU 2.27.14, 2.27.19)

*Locke's claim is that his theory gets these judgments about responsibility right, thereby showing that personhood tracks consciousness, not sameness of body/brain or sameness of immaterial soul.*

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# POSSIBLE WORRIES ABOUT LOCKE'S VIEW

- 📞 Does Locke's theory allow gaps in personal identity (where we lack memories of some period)?
  - 📞 Isn't an amnesiac still the same person who did all those things 'they' can no longer remember? (Locke replies 2.27.20)
  - 📞 How readily accessible do the memories have to be?
  - 📞 **'The gallant officer objection'**. What if A is conscious of B's earlier acts, and B is conscious of C's earlier acts, but A isn't conscious of C's acts. Then A *is* C, but also *isn't* C! (This is a failure of transitivity: If  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ )
  - 📞 Is there a **Circularity problem** with Locke's account? The idea is that, rather than being that which establishes a person's identity, a memory is a kind of thing which depends logically upon the person whose memory it is. If memory is used to establish personal identity, but memory in turn depends on the person whose identity it is supposed to account for, then we have returned to (come full circle) or assumed in our explanation the very notion of self which the use of memory was supposed to explain.
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